

August 19, 2020

Dear Friends,

Thank You

The plane has taken off! And we're stress-testing this plane while we're flying it. All the planning in the world could not make a perfect model for welcoming students back to campus safely during a pandemic because no one has ever done this before. There are bound to be some bumpy spots. I appreciate the kindness and patience that have been shown to the massive team that has pulled this together. That massive team includes you. Every single one of you is part of the team contributing to the success of this historic semester.

Vice-Chancellor Brigety recorded a [video](#) thanking everyone for the extraordinary efforts they have made in order to get us to this point.

#ProtectTheBubble

The semester is off to an excellent start, but continued vigilance is required from all of us. Be sure to do your part by observing the 3W's personally and reminding colleagues and students to do the same. If you observe consistent disregard for our COVID-19 policies, or other risky behavior, you can use the LiveSafe app to file a report. These reports are monitored by the Sewanee Police Department and will be addressed as appropriate.

Like many of you, I have been following how other schools are handling this pandemic. You have probably seen that some universities have already had to change their fall plans after the first week of classes. Following dramatic increases in positive test results, the University of North Carolina is sending students home, and Notre Dame has moved online-only for at least two weeks. While these are certainly reminders of the challenges facing institutions during this pandemic, it also illustrates important differences in our approach. As the section below details, Sewanee tested all students upon arrival and is retesting them all now, not only those with symptoms. Because of our size and location, we were able to implement a community-wide masking mandate and we have limited student travel to help reduce the chances of community spread. And so far, we have ample space to isolate students who test positive and quarantine those identified by contact tracing.

Student Testing

This is arguably the most important part of our plan. Without the ability to test every single student on their way in, we would be flying blind. But thanks to the work of Alyssa Summers, Clint Smith, Mary Heath, Mariel Gingrich, Eric Hartman, David Shipps, Stacey O'Sullivan, Sarah Richey, and more than 80 volunteers from across campus, our testing regimen is spectacular. I know of no other institution of higher education in the country that has been able to pull this off. See the University's testing results on our [Daily COVID-19 Dashboard](#).

We tested 1,554 students (College and School of Theology) as they arrived on campus, with only 17 testing positive—a 1.1% positivity rate. This is outstanding. We were told by the Tennessee Department of Health to expect 5-7%, especially as many of our students were arriving from current coronavirus hot spots. We have a few late arrivals coming in over the next few weeks, and they also are being tested upon arrival. Because test results are now available the next day, these students are being quarantined while they wait for their results.

As you know, we are retesting all students this week. Thus far, 449 have been retested with one testing positive. That is a 0.22% positivity rate. The new testing site is in the parking lot behind the Rebel's Rest archaeological site. Students are assigned a day to retest, and they can go anytime between 8 a.m. and 3 p.m. and receive their results the next day. Students are not required to quarantine while awaiting the results of the second test. We'll finish retesting all students by the end of the week and then determine the best rhythm for continued testing going forward.

Mental Health Resources

I want to reiterate what Vice-Chancellor Brigety said in his [Launching of a New Year address](#) yesterday—take care of yourselves. We are all very anxious, and for good reason, so we need to pay attention to how we are feeling and take care of ourselves, physically and mentally. Take time to relax and rest, to do something you love. Exercise and eat well. Avoid excessive time on social media, watching the news, or other activities that might serve only to increase anxiety.

I want to provide again the resources that I provided in May. A few tips for managing the extra stress can be found in [this infographic](#). There is additional information available at our [Human Resources COVID-19 resources page](#). The University provides resources to help you and your eligible dependents cope with these types of life events through our [Employee Assistance Program \(EAP\)](#). Call 877.595.5281 (24 hours a day, 365 days a year) to access them. The EAP provides confidential short-term counseling at no cost to you. This resource is available to you regardless of whether you are on the University's health plan.

In May, some of the anxiety came from feeling like we were not doing enough. Locked down and staying at home as much as possible, we couldn't take action. Now it's more likely that we are being asked by others and ourselves to do too much. Try to find some balance. Many of you have not had a break since March. Try to find some time for yourselves over the next few weeks as this new semester gets going. Now the most intensive planning is over, and many of the kinks are being worked out of the system. Taking care of yourself, mentally and physically, is always important, but it is extra important right now.

Year of Discernment

I hope many of you were able to watch the livestream of yesterday's brief Launching of a New Year event. In his remarks, the vice-chancellor called for this academic year to be a "Year of Discernment" for all of us—faculty, staff, students, alumni, and the community. After we take a minute to catch our breath, we can begin to look ahead. We will consider four themes together, including achieving national preeminence in our academic mission, and determine whether these

topics will be the objects of our collective efforts over the next five years. Look for more details to come about how this process will work.

From My Perspective

I think my favorite thing is the chairs. The blankets are good too, but the chairs carry more symbolism for me. What chairs, you might ask. Those outdoor chairs that the students brought with them on excellent advice from Student Life. They carry their chairs around practically everywhere, and use them for spontaneous outdoor gatherings all over campus. I see a lot of them in the Quad. In fact, I joined in and brought my “soccer mom” chair to work. I use it when all the Adirondack chairs are taken. The chairs symbolize a deeper understanding that things really are different this fall, but in a hopeful and positive sense. We focus so much on the negative aspects of this time, quite understandably, but we are adapting to this time as well, and learning how to live in it. I suppose that is what the chairs symbolize for me: adaptability and resilience.

Sincerely,

Nancy Berner

Provost